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**SURVIVING THE 21ST CENTURY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA:
OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING FOR HUMAN
CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT**

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SURVIVING THE 21ST CENTURY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING FOR HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Within the last several decades, Southeast Asia has witnessed many developments in higher education. Borne of the necessity to meet 21st Century challenges that have been brought about by globalisation, international competition and rapid expansion in information and communication technology, these developments necessarily relate to Southeast Asian countries' need to upgrade human capital to create a skilled workforce for a knowledge-based economy. Higher education in the traditional sense has not been able to cope with this demand, as resources and facilities are often limited in many developing Southeast Asian countries. However, it is now recognised that an alternative approach to higher education, such as that offered by open and distance learning, can pave the way for a more accessible, affordable and flexible means for people to attain higher education. Southeast Asia's open and distance learning environment is fast evolving, and the region already has many established open universities; thus indicating the great potential in its advancement for, as well as contribution to, national progress by meeting workforce-related educational needs. This paper will briefly review the current open and distance learning scene in Southeast Asia and discuss how open universities can contribute to human capital development. This paper will also explore possible scenarios for the future; where open and distance learning can further the cause of lifelong learning, what changes will be needed and how international collaboration can play a part in a developing region like Southeast Asia.

237 words

Introduction

A universal challenge for all ASEAN countries universally is the need to respond to 21st Century challenges brought about by globalisation, international competition and rapid expansion of information and communication technology (ICT). Higher education systems are inevitably required to change and adapt in order to meet these challenges. At the national level, these challenges indicate a greater concern for human capital development, where many countries realise the need to upgrade the skills of the workforce to create a knowledge-based economy capable of competing at the global front.

One of the most common strategies most countries take is to increase higher education enrolment as a way to improve the knowledge capacity of the people. However, this in itself is insufficient, as the existing workforce, especially in developing regions like SEA, is not highly skilled, and there is a lack of capacity for training and skills upgrading within existing industries. Many countries also lack the capacity and resources to cater to the growing demand for places in conventional universities. These current issues have led to low productivity as a whole, from which a nation's entire economy can suffer.

This is where open and distance learning (ODL) can play its part. ODL is an alternative approach to higher education that leverages on ICT to deliver academic programmes. Through ODL, people from all walks of life can enrol in higher education, either for career advancement, upgrading of qualifications or even for personal fulfilment.

Many notable ODL institutions have already been established in SEA, with some that are considered 'mega universities', i.e. institutions that have enrolled more than 100,000 learners. With ASEAN countries sharing the same concerns for addressing enrolment issues and improving the quality of the workforce, ODL can provide the solution that can transform higher education and help these countries survive the demands of the 21st Century.

This paper will briefly review the current Southeast Asian ODL scene and discuss how open universities can benefit human capital development. This paper will also explore possible scenarios for the future; including ODL's role in lifelong learning and the potential of international collaboration for regional development.

Open and Distance Learning in SEA: A Brief Review

SEA's first open admissions university to be established is Thailand's Ramkhamhaeng University, in 1971 (Jung & Latchem, 2007). Ramkhamhaeng University was set up to ease the imbalance between the high number of school-leavers seeking enrolment into universities and the insufficient admission capacities of Thai universities at the time. Over the next three decades, ODL institutions have been set up in other ASEAN countries with a similar rationale. Many Southeast Asians now had an alternative route to obtain university education.

Many of the distinguished open universities are also some of the region's largest, including Indonesia's Universitas Terbuka (UT), Malaysia's Open University Malaysia (OUM), as well as Thailand's Ramkhamhaeng University and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU). In fact, institutions that have enrolled more than 500,000 learners, like UT, one of Asia's most renowned ODL institutions, are now known as 'super mega universities'. The following are some of the notable open universities in SEA (Table 1).

Table 1: Notable Open Universities in SEA

Country	Open University	Year of Establishment	Learner Enrolment
Indonesia	Universitas Terbuka	1984	~590,000*
Malaysia	Open University Malaysia	2000	~120,000**
	Wawasan Open University	2007	NA
	Asia e University	2008	NA
Myanmar	University of Distance Education	1992	>600,000**
The Philippines	University of the Philippines Open University	1995	NA
Thailand	Ramkhamhaeng University	1971	525,000*
	Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University	1978	~200,000*
Vietnam	Ho Chi Minh City Open University	1993	NA
	Hanoi Open University	1993	~165,000**

Note:

* Active

** Cumulative

NA Data not available

Open universities in SEA share many similar challenges as well. One of the most persistent is the need to improve ICT facilities, especially for countries where infrastructures are poor and resources are limited. Other issues include retaining learners throughout their studies, inadequate funds and difficulty in reaching rural and remote areas, as well as faculty training and development. Overcoming these challenges will be an imperative to further advance the ODL cause in SEA.

Open and Distance Learning for Human Capital Development: Rationalisation and Issues

The transformation of higher education clearly relates to various global developments, in particular the influence of international competition and prevalence of ICT as mentioned earlier. This need for human capital development in the drive towards a more skilled workforce has led to a gaining importance of higher education in the national agenda.

Knowledge workers, broadly defined as “workers whose main capital is knowledge”, play crucial roles for national progress, and it is every country’s concern to create avenues through which its people can be trained to become valuable contributors to the economy.

For this reason, many countries have focused on improving higher education participation rates. Malaysia, incidentally, has targeted a 50% participation rate of 17-24 year-olds by 2020, although the current figure is closer to 32%. This phenomenon is similar in other developing countries. Furthermore, setting targets alone cannot fully address the need to create a skilled workforce as a majority of the current workforce have lower qualifications and industries may not have the capacity to provide the required training. Only 26.1% of the current Malaysian workforce is armed with tertiary-level qualification (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011). This circumstance must be improved if Malaysia is to achieve the national target of 33% of the workforce employed in higher skilled jobs by 2015, and up to 50% of the same by 2020 (Government of Malaysia, 2011).

Higher education reforms have often involved ODL as a novel approach towards widening access to higher education. By leveraging on ICT, ODL utilises a delivery method that allows learners to study on a part-time basis, often using an online platform and without having to attend on-campus classes. This flexibility is the main advantage for working adults who cannot afford to study full-time.

ODL can also be considered an important tool for human resource and human capital development. At OUM, the bulk of the learner population is formed of teachers, nurses, those in human resource and business management as well as information technology. This is because ODL programmes tend to gravitate toward career-oriented and industry-driven fields, thus making them even more attractive to those who are already working. This form of capacity building has many benefits, including:

- Those with higher qualifications have a chance for promotion and career advancement;
- The workforce is boosted by skills and knowledge upgrading of working individuals; and
- The enculturation of lifelong learning as an important component in human capital development.

For ODL, the challenge at this juncture is ensuring that quality measures in all facets of delivery are met; including quality of faculty, content, assessment and support services. Leveraging on ICT is particularly crucial, as this is one means for enhancing effectiveness of ODL, especially through innovative use of advanced technologies. The role of ICT in ODL has already been regularly discussed, but more novel applications, e.g. mobile learning, open educational resources (OER), collaborative learning and social media, will need greater attention, as they are becoming more pervasive and influential in the 21st Century. To be using ICT effectively will mean fostering innovation through mobilising resources, skills, cultural values, social competencies and capabilities (Ferrari, Cachia & Punie, 2010). For ODL institutions like OUM, ICT innovations can be credited

for its unique delivery system utilising a blended pedagogy that comprises online learning, self-managed learning and face-to-face tutorials. It is this blended pedagogy that has allowed OUM to reach over 120,000 learners throughout Malaysia since its first intake in 2001.

Quality assurance (QA) is possibly the most persistent issue in ODL. All Asian mega universities and a majority of other open universities have reportedly developed and implemented QA procedures and standards in key areas in ODL (Jung, 2007). The continuous evolution of ODL and QA measures has created a new awareness on the importance of a quality culture in delivering academic programmes, and this necessarily relates to a learner-centred focus that is often expounded by ODL providers. Learner-centredness is crucial in ODL, as it relates to the retention of learners as well as for creating a rewarding learning environment. This awareness can hopefully create a path through which best practices across Southeast Asian ODL institutions can be shared and exchanged in a region-wide QA initiative that can indeed make for an important step for SEA. The ASEAN University Network – Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) can perhaps be extended to ODL institutions, where educational standards specific to ODL can be harmonised and consolidated in a formal approach.

The impact of international competition also needs to be discussed. In a globalised world, educational institutions are also concerned with successfully building an international presence. ODL institutions need to balance between competition and the need for collaboration. Internal competition between institutions within national boundaries is good and can drive domestic growth. However, creating partnerships is equally important as it allows ODL institutions to learn from one another, and if achieved at a regional level, can bring region-wide growth or global recognition. This requires sustainability and understanding between the top management of participating institutions to ensure a good working relationship between partners. OUM's own experience has been quite fortuitous. The university has collaborated with various institutions that share the university's goals to provide quality services to all learners. OUM's global outreach is an example of what an ASEAN open university can achieve through international collaboration. The following are some of OUM's partners from different regions in the world:

1. Arab Open University, Bahrain;
2. University of Science and Technology, Yemen;
3. Villa College, The Maldives;
4. Accra Institute of Technology, Ghana;
5. International Institute of Health Sciences, Sri Lanka;
6. Eszterházy Károly College, Hungary;
7. Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Vietnam;
8. JR School and Athena International Centre for Excellence, Mauritius;
9. SIMAD University, Somalia; and
10. Graduate School of Management, Sri Lanka.

Its close relationship with other open universities in SEA, especially UT, STOU and UPOU, also spells great potential for regional cooperation to be strengthened under an

organisation like the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation Regional Open Learning Centre (SEAMEO SEAMOLEC). Although ASEAN is a diverse melting pot, regional commonality can be a unifying factor to encourage greater cooperation amongst ODL institutions in SEA.

Equally important are issues related to accessibility, affordability and flexibility. Ensuring universal access means that ODL programmes should not be limited only to those living in urban areas. ODL institutions must explore ways to provide nationwide infrastructures, such as Internet (including broadband and WiFi) access and other ICT facilities, to reach learners in both urban and rural areas. This relates to the issue of affordability, whereby ODL providers must achieve cost-effectiveness (especially in terms of ICT investment) while maintaining fees that are affordable to those within the lower income brackets, as the latter are the main ODL target market. That said, carefully investing in ICT can result in economies of scale and lowering of delivery costs. Prohibitive costs affect retention of learners in ODL institutions, which needs to be carefully monitored to ensure that there is a successful continuum between enrolment of learners and the creation of knowledge workers.

Flexibility is another commonly discussed issue in ODL, and relates to an institution's ability to create a system that can suit working adults. Fully utilising ICT is again an important strategy, especially to reach learners through various platforms and media, so that teaching and learning can take place anywhere, anytime as well as both synchronously and asynchronously.

Possible Future Scenarios

Of late, developments in ODL, higher education as well as nationally, have been associated with the concept of lifelong learning. In Malaysia, the recently released Blueprint on Enculturation of Lifelong Learning for Malaysia (2011-2020) acknowledges lifelong learning as the third pillar in human capital development; thus recognising it as an equally important component as the school and higher education systems. The increasing emphasis on lifelong learning is evident in other ASEAN countries – its concept is predominantly linked to adult and continuing education. With efforts like Malaysia's Blueprint already in implementation, awareness at the community level will grow, and more working adults are likely to seek opportunities in ODL to upgrade their qualifications and for self-improvement. ODL institutions will need to anticipate this growth, and cater to the foreseeable demand.

With specific regard to human capital development, it is important for ODL programmes to be relevant to current industry needs, particularly those related to skills upgrading and professional programmes. This means that the ODL curriculum needs to be adaptable and extend beyond basic or mainstream academic requirements to give greater emphasis to specific job-related needs. The proliferation of industrial and professional degrees is a positive trend that can immediately benefit industries and economies.

Finally, the nature or extent of collaboration amongst ODL institutions in SEA also needs to be evaluated. If partnerships and joint curriculum development are already in practice today, including what has been achieved in SEA; ODL institutions will need to explore what future collaborations might entail. With the support of regional organisations like SEAMEO SEAMOLEC and ASEAN as well, ODL institutions in SEA can further this cause to create opportunities for mutual benefit.

One example could be a regional OER database that aggregates relevant learning materials from all ODL institutions, to be made available to all open and distance learners in this region, thus hopefully promoting a more open atmosphere for ODL to evolve in SEA. Initiatives that can be quickly implemented are joint publication or research activities on areas of common interest, such as what has been achieved by some of the ASEAN open universities. In the long run, ODL institutions could also consider the offering of joint degrees, credit transfer between institutions, curriculum development and sharing of ICT applications; although these are likely to be more complex and long-term in nature.

Concluding Remarks

The 21st Century is fraught with challenges. Globalisation, international competition and the ICT revolution are some that have immense impact not only on everyday life, but on higher education as well. Expectations and demands from higher education stakeholders have changed, and many countries, including in SEA, realise the need to leverage on higher education to upgrade the skills of the workforce to create a knowledge-based economy that would be vital to achieve and maintain a competitive edge. This centres on the increasingly important concept of human capital development; where the knowledge capacity of the workforce is recognised as the mainstay for 21st Century progress.

The role of ODL in contributing to human capital development is one that needs to be acknowledged and lauded. While conventional higher education institutions can continue to seek ways to improve enrolment of full-time learners in the effort to increase national participation rates, ODL institutions can focus on upgrading the qualification levels of the current workforce, as the latter is most likely to benefit from industry-relevant educational opportunities. Likewise, industries and national economy are also the most likely to immediately benefit from the educational attainment of the current workforce.

To survive the 21st Century in SEA, countries will need to evaluate the effectiveness of ODL, and consider the requirements of potential future scenarios. “Forewarned is forearmed”; and this is where ODL institutions need to be more proactive. In SEA as well as globally, human capital development will continue to be a relevant and persistent concern in the 21st Century. ODL’s relevance in this endeavour will depend on its ability to adapt to national needs and global dynamics.

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